

Opening Statement of
The Honorable Tom Feeney, Ranking Republican Member
Subcommittee on Space and Aeronautics
NASA's Astronaut Health Care System – Results of an Independent Review
September 6, 2007

After the Astronaut Lisa Nowak incident earlier this year, NASA Administrator Mike Griffin convened the NASA Astronaut Health Care System Review Committee. I want to thank this distinguished panel of aerospace medical experts for their service. I also want to commend Administrator Griffin for inviting independent review of this health care system.

If we can put the report's sensationalistic element aside for a moment, the committee provided several thoughtful recommendations to heighten the importance of human factors and to improve the monitoring of each astronaut's physical and mental well-being.

After the Shuttle is retired, NASA's Constellation program will return Americans to the moon for extended stays. An astronaut's physical and psychological well-being will be more and not less important. So it is imperative to thoroughly examine this issue and establish an astronaut health care system that properly addresses future and not just current medical concerns.

Unfortunately, the report's sensationalistic element – allegations of astronaut intoxication shortly before spaceflight – drowned out the remainder of the report.

Since the report's issuance in late July, these allegations remain uncorroborated. No eyewitness has come forward to specifically state who, what, when, and where.

So far, this search for corroboration reveals the shortcomings of relying on anonymous allegations. Anonymity can certainly promote candor. But absent corroboration, such allegations unfairly force good men and women to prove a negative.

My office has heard from astronauts and NASA officials – all deeply devoted to human spaceflight and highly credible – who adamantly deny this misbehavior represents current or recent conduct. These people have longstanding first-hand knowledge of the astronaut program and simply state that alcohol influence during the immediate preflight period doesn't exist. Because an astronaut interacts with so many people during this period, I find it difficult to believe that such behavior could go undetected. But I don't want the alcohol issue to detract from a more troublesome finding that flight surgeons and astronauts are hesitant to report "major crew medical or behavioral problems" because their concerns would be disregarded or ignored. And James Oberg – a distinguished and respected space commentator – followed up with last month's thoughtful story detailing inconsistent approaches to significant astronaut health concerns.

This type of culture – called a normalization of deviance – contributed to the Challenger and Columbia accidents. It cannot be allowed to flourish in the most demanding of human endeavors – human spaceflight. We must be ever vigilant against such behavior.

Today's hearing is part of that vigilance.